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ESSAY

The Rise and Fall of the Failed-State Paradigm

Requiem for a Decade of Distraction

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For a decade and a half, from the mid-1990s through about 2010, the dominant national security narrative in the United States stressed the dangers posed by weak or failing states. These were seen to breed terrorism, regional chaos, crime, disease, and environmental catastrophe. To deal with such problems at their roots, the argument ran, the United States had to reach out and help stabilize the countries in question, engaging in state building on a neo-imperial scale. And reach out the United States did -- most obviously during the protracted campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq.

After a decade of conflict and effort with precious little to show for it, however, the recent era of interventionist U.S. state building is drawing to a close. And although there are practical reasons for this shift -- the United States can no longer afford such missions, and the public has tired of them -- the decline of the state-building narrative reflects a more profound underlying truth: the obsession with weak states was always more of a mania than a sound strategic doctrine. Its passing will not leave the United States more isolationist and vulnerable but rather free the country to focus on its more important global roles.

THE BIRTH OF A PARADIGM

In the wake of the Cold War, contemplating a largely benign security environment, many U.S. national security strategists and practitioners concluded that the most important risks were posed by the fragility of state structures and recommended profound shifts in U.S. foreign and defense policy as a result. In an interconnected world, they argued, chaos, violence, and grievances anywhere had the potential to affect U.S. interests, and weak states were factories of such volatility. Experiences in Somalia, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia helped fuel the concern, and by 1994, the CIA was funding a state-failure task force to get a handle on the problem.
In 1997, the Clinton administration released Presidential Decision Directive 56, “Managing Complex Contingency Operations,” which began with the assertion that “in the wake of the Cold War, attention has focused on a rising number of territorial disputes, armed ethnic conflicts, and civil wars that pose threats to regional and international peace.” A new focus of U.S. policy, accordingly, would be responding to such situations with “multi-dimensional operations composed of such components as political/diplomatic, humanitarian, intelligence, economic development, and security.”

Critics of a realist persuasion objected to the emerging narrative, arguing that the Clinton administration’s forays into state building in peripheral areas represented a strategic folly. And during his 2000 presidential campaign, George W. Bush ran as the candidate of foreign policy humility, arguing in part that nation building was a dangerous distraction. His adviser Condoleezza Rice grumbled that U.S. troops should not be asked to escort toddlers to school; his vice presidential candidate, Dick Cheney, suggested that a Bush administration would end U.S. participation in Balkan operations; and the day before the election, Bush himself declared, “Let me tell you what else I’m worried about: I’m worried about an opponent who uses ‘nation building’ and ‘the military’ in the same sentence.”

But the 9/11 attacks swept these hesitations aside, as the practical implications of an interventionist “war on terror” became apparent. The first page of the Bush administration’s 2002 National Security Strategy argued that “America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones. We are menaced less by fleets and armies than by catastrophic technologies in the hands of the embittered few.”

The new consensus was bipartisan. The Democratic foreign policy hand Susan Rice, for example, wrote in 2003 that Bush was “wise to draw attention to the significant threats to our national security posed by failed and failing states.” Where the right emphasized security and terrorism, the left added humanitarian concerns. Development specialists jumped on the bandwagon as well, thanks to new studies that highlighted the importance of institutions and good governance as requirements for sustained economic success. In his 2004 book, State-Building, the political scientist Francis Fukuyama wrote, “Weak and failing states have arguably become the single most important problem for international order.” The Washington Post editorialized the same year that “weak states can compromise security -- most obviously by providing havens for terrorists but also by incubating organized crime, spurring waves of migrants, and undermining global efforts to control environmental threats and disease.” This argument, the paper concluded, “is no longer much contested.” A year later, the State Department’s director of policy planning, Stephen Krasner, and its newly minted coordinator for reconstruction and stabilization, Carlos Pascual, argued in these pages that “in today’s increasingly interconnected world, weak and failed states pose an acute risk to U.S. and global security. Indeed, they present one of the most important foreign policy challenges of the contemporary era.”

From one angle, the concern with weak states could be seen as a response to actual conditions on the ground. Problems had always festered in disordered parts of the developing world. Without great-power conflict as an urgent national security priority, those problems were more clearly visible and harder to ignore. From another angle, it could be seen as a classic meme -- a concept or intellectual fad riding to prominence through social diffusion, articles by prominent thinkers, a flurry of attention from
the mainstream press, and a series of foundation grants, think-tank projects, roundtables, and conferences.

From a third angle, however, it could be seen as a solution to an unusual concern confronting U.S. policymakers in this era: what to do with a surplus of national power. The United States entered the 1990s with a dominant international position and no immediate threats. Embracing a substantially reduced U.S. global role would have required a fundamental reassessment of the prevailing consensus in favor of continued primacy, something few in or around the U.S. national security establishment were prepared to consider. Instead, therefore, whether consciously or not, that establishment generated a new rationale for global engagement, one involving the application of power and influence to issues that at any other time would have been seen as secondary or tertiary. Without a near-peer competitor (or several) to deter or a major war on the horizon, Washington found a new foreign policy calling: renovating weak or failing states.

THE DECLINE OF A STRATEGIC NARRATIVE

The practical challenges of state-building missions are now widely appreciated. They tend to be long, difficult, and expensive, with success demanding an open-ended commitment to a messy, violent, and confusing endeavor -- something unlikely to be sustained in an era of budgetary austerity. But the last decade has driven home intellectual challenges to the concept as well.

The threat posed by weak and fragile states, for example, turned out to be both less urgent and more complex and diffuse than was originally suggested. Foreign Policy’s Failed States Index for 2013 is not exactly a roster of national security priorities; of its top 20 weak states, very few (Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan) boast geostrategic significance, and they do so mostly because of their connection to terrorism. But even the threat of terrorism isn’t highly correlated with the current roster of weak states; only one of the top 20, Sudan, appears on the State Department’s list of state sponsors of terrorism, and most other weak states have only a marginal connection to terrorism at best.

A lack of definitional rigor posed a second problem. There has never been a coherent set of factors that define failed states: As the political scientist Charles Call argued in a powerful 2008 corrective, the concept resulted in the “agglomeration of diverse criteria” that worked to “throw a monolithic cloak over disparate problems that require tailored solutions.” This basic methodological flaw would distort state-building missions for years, as outside powers forced generic, universal solutions onto very distinct contexts.

The specified dangers were never unique to weak states, moreover, nor would state-building campaigns necessarily have mitigated them. Take terrorism. The most effective terrorists tend to be products of the middle class, often from nations such as Saudi Arabia, Germany, and the United Kingdom, not impoverished citizens of failed states. And terrorist groups operating in weak states can shift their bases of operations: if Afghanistan becomes too risky, they can uproot themselves and move to Somalia, Yemen, or even Europe. As a result, “stabilizing” three or four sources of extremist violence would not render the United States secure. The same could be said of threats such as organized crime, which finds comfortable homes in functioning but troubled states in Asia, eastern Europe, and Latin America.
As the scholar Stewart Patrick noted in a 2006 examination of the purported threats issuing from weak states, “What is striking is how little empirical evidence underpins these assertions and policy developments. Analysts and policymakers alike have simply presumed the existence of a blanket connection between state weakness and threats to the national security of developed countries and have begun to recommend and implement policy responses.”

And although interconnectedness and interdependence may create risks, the dangers in such a world are more likely to come from strong, well-governed states with imperfect regulations than weak ones with governance deficiencies. Financial volatility that can shake the foundations of leading nations and cyberattacks that could destabilize energy or information networks pose more immediate and persistent risks than, say, terrorism.

A third problem was misplaced confidence about the possibility of the mission’s feasibility. The last decade has offered an extended, tragic reminder of the fact that forcible state building simply cannot be accomplished by outsiders in any sustainable or authentic way. When a social order has become maladapted to the globalizing world -- when governing institutions are weak, personalized, or kleptocratic; corruption is rampant; and the rule of law is noticeable by its absence -- there are simply no proven methods for generating major social, political, economic, or cultural change relatively quickly.

As the Australian political scientist Michael Wesley argued in a brilliant 2008 essay, state weakness is primarily a political problem, and yet state building is often conceived and executed as if it were an apolitical exercise. “The intention of remaining aloof from politics while concentrating on technocratic reforms has proved unrealistic,” he wrote. “Even seemingly technocratic tasks confront international administrators with essentially political decisions: the nature and basis of elections; which pressure groups to consult; the reintegration or de facto separation of ethnic communities; school curricula; degrees of public ownership of enterprises; the status of women; and so on. However technocratic their intention, state-building missions inevitably find themselves factored into local rivalries.”

In trying to force change on recalcitrant governments and societies, moreover, outside interventions undermine internal motives for reform by transferring responsibility for a better future from local leaders to external actors. The outside power needs cooperation from its local clients more than they need its sponsorship. The result is a dependency paradox that impedes reform. As success stories from South Korea to Chile show, the path from state weakness to strength has to be traveled by the states themselves, gradually and fitfully, most often under the influence of strong, decisive leadership from visionary architects of governance. It is an organic, grass-roots process that must respect the unique social, cultural, economic, political, and religious contexts of each country. And although it can be encouraged and even modestly shaped by outside contributions and pressure, it cannot be imposed.

A fourth problem with the state-building obsession was that it distorted the United States’ sense of its central purpose and role in global politics. Ever since World War II, the United States has labored mightily to underwrite the stability of the international system. It has done this by assembling military alliances to protect its friends and deter its enemies, by helping construct a global architecture of trade
and finance, and by policing the global commons. These actions have helped buttress an interdependent system of states that see their dominant interests in stability rather than conquest.

Playing this role well demands sustained attention at all levels of government, in part to nurture the relationships essential to crisis management, diplomacy, and multilateral cooperation of all kinds. Indeed, the leading danger in the international system today is the peril that, assaulted by a dozen causes of rivalry and mistrust, the system will fragment into geopolitical chaos. The U.S. experience since the 1990s, and growing evidence from Northeast Asia, suggests that if the relatively stable post–Cold War era devolves into interstate rivalry, it will be not the result of weak states but that of the escalating regional ambitions, bitter historical memories, and flourishing nationalisms of increasingly competitive states. The U.S. role in counteracting the broader trends of systemic disintegration is therefore critical. The United States is the linchpin of a number of key alliances and networks; it provides the leadership and attractive force for many global diplomatic endeavors, and its dominant military position helps rule out thoughts of aggression in many quarters.

The weak-state obsession has drawn attention away from such pursuits and made a resurgence of traditional threats more likely. Focusing on two seemingly endless wars and half a dozen other potential “stability operations” has eroded U.S. global engagement, diminished U.S. diplomatic creativity, and distracted U.S. officials from responding appropriately to changes in the global landscape.

When one reads the memoirs of Bush administration officials, the dozen or more leading global issues beyond Afghanistan, Iraq, and the “war on terror” begin to sound like background noise. Top U.S. officials appear to have spent far more time between 2003 and 2011, for example, managing the fractious mess of Iraqi politics than tending to relationships with key global powers. As a consequence, senior U.S. officials have had less time to cultivate the leaders of rising regional powers, from Brazil to India to Turkey. Sometimes, U.S. actions or demands in state-building adventures have directly undermined other important relationships or diplomatic initiatives, as when Washington faced the global political reaction to the Iraq war.

Such tradeoffs reflect a hallmark of the era of state building: secondary issues became dominant ones. To be fair, this was partly the fault of globalization; around-the-clock media coverage now constantly shoves problems a world away onto the daily agendas of national leaders. Combined with the United States’ self-image as the indispensable nation, this intrusive awareness created political pressure to act on issues of limited significance to core U.S. interests. Yet this is precisely the problem: U.S. perceptions of global threats and of the country’s responsibility to address them have become badly and perhaps permanently skewed. A great power’s reservoir of strategic attention is not infinite. And the United States has become geopolitically hobbled, seemingly uninterested in grand strategic initiatives or transformative diplomacy, as its attention constantly dances from one crisis to another.

A fifth problem flowed directly from the fourth. To perform its global stabilizing role, the United States needs appropriately designed, trained, and equipped armed forces -- forces that can provide a global presence, prevail in high-end conflict contingencies, enable quick long-range strike and interdiction capabilities, and build and support local partners’ capacities. The state-building mission has skewed the
operations, training, equipping, and self-conception of the U.S. military in ways that detract from these responsibilities.

Much of the U.S. military has spent a decade focusing on state building and counterinsurgency (COIN), especially in its training and doctrine, to the partial neglect of more traditional tasks. Massive investments have gone into COIN-related equipment, such as the MRAP (mine-resistant, ambush-protected) vehicles built to protect U.S. troops from improvised explosive devices, draining billions of dollars from other national security resources. The result of these choices has been to weaken the U.S. military’s ability to play more geostrategic and, ultimately, more important roles. Between a demanding operational tempo, the requirements of refitting between deployments, and a shift in training to emphasize COIN, the U.S. military, especially its ground forces, lost much of its proficiency in full-spectrum combat operations. Simply put, the U.S. military would be far better positioned today -- better aligned with the most important roles for U.S. power, better trained for its traditional missions, better equipped for an emerging period of austerity -- had the state-building diversion never occurred.

AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL

None of this is meant to suggest that a concern for the problems posed by weak or failing states can or should disappear entirely from the U.S. foreign policy and national security agendas. Counterterrorism and its associated tasks will surely remain important, and across the greater Middle East -- including Afghanistan after 2014 -- internal turmoil may well have external consequences requiring some response from Washington. Effective local institutions do contribute to stability and growth, and the United States should do what it can to nurture them where possible. The difference is likely to be in the priority Washington accords such efforts. The January 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance, for example, reflected the judgment that “U.S. forces will no longer be sized to conduct large-scale, prolonged stability operations” and announced an intention to pursue “innovative, low-cost, and small-footprint approaches” to achieving objectives. Recently, the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral James “Sandy” Winnefeld, went even further: “I simply don’t know where the security interests of our nation are threatened enough to cause us to lead a future major, extended COIN campaign.”

In the future, the United States is likely to rely less on power projection and more on domestic preparedness, replacing an urgent civilized zeal with defensive self-protection. This makes sense, because the most appropriate answer to the dangers inherent in an era of interdependence and turbulence is domestic resilience: hardened and redundant networks of information and energy, an emphasis on local or regional self-sufficiency to reduce the cascading effects of systemic shocks, improved domestic emergency-response and cybersecurity capacities, sufficient investments in pandemic response, and so forth. Equally important is a resilient mindset, one that treats perturbations as inevitable rather than calamitous and resists the urge to overreact. In this sense, the global reaction to the recent surge in piracy -- partly a product of poor governance in African states -- should be taken as a model: no state-building missions, but arming and protecting the ships at risk.

When it does reach out into the world to deal with weak states, the United States should rely on gradual progress through patient, long-term advisory and aid relationships, based on such activities as direct
economic assistance tailored to local needs; training, exchanges, and other human-capacity-development programs; military-to-military ties; trade and investment policies; and more. The watchwords should be patience, gradualism, and tailored responses: enhancing effective governance through a variety of models attuned to local patterns and needs, in advisory and supportive ways.

As weak states continue to generate specific threats, such as terrorism, the United States has a range of more limited tools available to mitigate them. It can, for example, return terrorism to its proper place as a law enforcement task and continue to work closely with foreign law enforcement agencies. It can help train and develop such agencies, as well as local militaries, to lead in the fight. When necessary, it can employ targeted coercive instruments -- classic intelligence work and clandestine operations, raids by special operations forces, and, with far greater selectivity than today, remote strikes -- to deal with particular threats, ideally in concert with the militaries of local allies.

Some will contend that U.S. officials can never rule out expeditionary state building because events may force it back onto the agenda. If al Qaeda were to launch an attack that was planned in restored Taliban strongholds in a post-2014 Afghanistan, or if a fragmentation and radicalization of Pakistani society were to place nuclear control at risk, some would recommend a return to interventionist state building. Yet after the United States’ recent experiences, it is doubtful that such a call would resonate.

The idea of a neo-imperial mission to strengthen weak states and stabilize chaotic societies always flew in the face of more important U.S. global roles and real mechanisms of social change. There is still work to be done in such contexts, but in more prudent and discriminate ways. Moving on from the civilizing mission will, in turn, make possible a more sustainable and effective national security strategy, allowing the United States to return its full attention to the roles and missions that mean far more to long-term peace and security. One of the benefits of this change, ironically, will be to allow local institutional development to proceed more organically and authentically, in its own ways and at its own pace. Most of all, the new mindset will reflect a simple facing up to reality after a decade of distraction.

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